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Work made us what we are: Complexity of work, self-directedness of orientation, and intellectual flexibility of older US and Japanese men[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Following Kohn and Schooler's theoretical and analytical frameworks, this study establishes that the reciprocal relationships between self-directed occupational conditions and both self-directed orientation and intellectual functioning are the same for older US and Japanese men. Using longitudinal data from representative samples of US men employed in 1964 and 1994 and Japanese men employed in 1979 and 2006, we conducted multi-group structural equation modeling. In both countries, self-directed complex work increased both self-directed orientation and intellectual functioning. Reciprocally, these two types of psychological functioning had positive effects on self-directed occupational conditions. These findings indicate that although there exist cultural and structural differences in occupational settings, in stable societies, job conditions can continue to affect and reflect central aspects of psychological functioning in relatively late life stages.

1. Introduction

Social stratification research has focused on the effects of individuals' positions in the social structure of their societies—usually captured by social class or occupational standing (socioeconomic status (SES) or occupational prestige)—on several kinds of outcomes, such as political attitudes (Svallfors, 2006), personality (Kohn, 1989; McLeod and Lively, 2003), parenting (Chan and Koo, 2010; Weininger and Lareau, 2009), voting behavior (Manza, Hout, & Brooks, 1995), cultural consumption (Chan, 2010), the social positions of successive generations (Breen, 2004; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992). Approximately persistent relationships between individuals' social stratification positions and their life chances and lifestyle have been observed in many societies, regardless of their degree of industrialization and modernization. Of the various mechanisms behind the generation and persistence of inequality, one results from the relationship between individuals' social positions and their psychological functioning that characterizes and directs their actions and behavior. Such effects of an individual's social position on their psychological functioning have

attracted continuing interest among social-psychological and sociological researchers (House, 1977; Kohn, 1989; McLeod and Lively, 2003; Schnittker, 2013).

Kohn and Schooler (1983) focused on occupational self-direction, which plays a pivotal role in explaining the relationship between position in a social structure and psychological functioning. They proposed a theoretical axis of self-direction vs. conformity, which reflected a high vs. low position in a social stratification system: in effect, the more one's job conditions are self-directed, the more one becomes self-directed, which lessens conformity. In addition, the more one becomes self-directed, the more one's occupational environment improves regarding being self-directed. In their later studies, Kohn and Schooler generalized the *reciprocal effects paradigm* – the so called Kohn-Schooler hypothesis – to encompass the job conditions and housework of married women, the educational conditions of adolescents in school, and so on (Kohn, 2006; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Miller et al., 1986). Moreover, Kohn, Schooler, and colleagues conducted comparable surveys in Poland, Japan, Ukraine, Mali, and China¹ to test the generalizability of the US findings (Kohn, 2006; Kohn, Naoi, Schoenbach, Schooler, &

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¹ Kohn and colleagues extended comparable surveys to China to test the generality and interpretation of the US findings (Kohn et al., 2007, 2012). Kohn et al. (2007) demonstrated that psychological concepts used in the previous studies (and adopted in this paper) were valid in investigating urban China. Kohn et al. (2012) found that, in China, more advantageous social positions in social class and social stratification were related to more self-directed orientation and higher intellectual flexibility, as in Poland and Ukraine, although these countries experienced very different social transformations. However, in China, job conditions offered less explanation for the relationship class position and personality compared to their explanatory power in the US, Japan, Poland, and Ukraine.

Slomczynski, 1990; Kohn, Khmelko, Paniotto, & Hung, 2004; Kohn, Li, Wang, & Yue, 2007; Kohn, Wang, & Yue, 2012; Schooler, Mounkoro, Diakit , & Caplan, 2007; Schooler, Caplan, Mounkoro, & Diakit , 2016).

In the 1990s, Kohn engaged in cross-cultural comparisons of the US and other societies, especially Poland and Ukraine during the early stages of their transition from socialism to nascent capitalism (Kohn, 2006). The consequences of radical social change experienced in these East European industrial societies were examined by analyzing originally collected longitudinal datasets. In the longitudinal study of Ukraine in 1992–93 and 1996, Kohn et al. (2004) found that the relationship between social structure and personality there was similar to that found in the capitalist US and Japan. However, only a very small part of the Polish data was longitudinal, in the sense of the same individuals being interviewed at both time points (Kohn et al., 2004). Therefore, it was not possible to conduct reciprocal effects analyses to test the replicability in Poland of Kohn and Schooler’s original reciprocal effects findings. They also found that during a period of three to three and a half years of ongoing radical social change in Ukraine, the stability of personality was astonishingly low, even in intellectual flexibility, compared to that over a period almost 10 times as long in the US (Schooler, Mulatu, & Oates, 2004), although the stability of substantive complexity of work proved to be very high. Kohn (2006) showed that the over-time correlations of personality were basically much lower for the Ukrainian men and women from 1992 to 93 to 1996 (3–3.5 years) than for the US men from 1964 to 1974 (10 years). In addition, Schooler et al. (2007) found that over-time correlations of personality for the US men from 1964 to 1994 (30 years) and from 1974 to 1994 (20 years) were relatively high, although there were clearly social and technological changes during these time periods. These findings suggest that “very pronounced social change can affect the over-time correlations of psychological characteristics that appear relatively stable in more stable times and contexts” (Schooler et al., 2007: 2).

Furthermore, the strong reciprocal relationships of work and personality found in the stable US society were not observed in Ukrainian society during a time of radical social change (Kohn, 2006). In Ukraine, while job conditions affected personality, personality had little effect on job conditions. As Kohn (2006: xiv) reasoned:

“Do social- structural position and its attendant job conditions *affect* or only *reflect* personality? Schooler’s and my (I think, definitive) answer to this long-standing question was that the relationship of social structure and personality is *quintessentially reciprocal*. I would now add: *at least under conditions of social stability.*”

Meanwhile, Schooler and colleagues at the Laboratory of Socio-Environmental Studies (LSES) – a branch of the National Institute of the Mental Health Laboratory (NIMH) – conducted a second follow-up survey of their original respondents in the US in late 1994 and early 1995. The 30-year panel data provided ample material to study the participants’ latter years as compared to the years of their youth. Focusing again on the axis of self-direction vs. conformity, they tested whether the nature of one’s occupational and other environmental life conditions affect and reflect one’s psychological functioning throughout the life course (Schooler, Mulatu, & Oates, 1999; Schooler and Mulatu, 2001; Schooler et al., 2004). Findings from a third survey wave of the US sample conducted in 1994 showed that this pattern of reciprocal effects continued even into the later stage of individuals’ work careers (Schooler et al., 2004). This pattern of reciprocal effects between self-directed occupational conditions and effective functioning in relatively late life stages has also been replicated with data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (Hauser and Roan, 2007). In other US analyses, the reciprocal effects analytic paradigm for longitudinal data has been applied to examine the reciprocal effects of intellectual functioning and the levels of complexity of environmental demands (Schooler et al., 1999) of housework (Caplan and Schooler, 2006), and of leisure-time activities (Schooler and Mulatu, 2001). These studies have generally found evidence of predicted reciprocal effects between environmental

complexity and psychological functioning, from not only sociological but also psychological perspectives (Schooler et al., 2004). These findings imply that the mechanisms of how an individual’s psychological characteristics are formed and maintained interact with the surrounding environment during the aging process.²

Overall, the Kohn-Schooler studies provide clues for examining how robustly the vertical stratification structure is reinforced by people’s subjectivity, which, in turn, also forms a vertical order, at least in stable societies. This relationship is derived from the fundamental assumption of the close association of social structure and personality, as insisted by Karl Marx: “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life” (Marx (1859) 1977: 21). Therefore, for both class analysis and, in a broader sense, social stratification research, further confirmation of their hypothesis provides evidences that the classic assumption is still relevant in contemporary society.

In this paper, we test the cross-cultural generalizability of the *reciprocal effects paradigm*, particularly the degree to which the causal structure of the US corresponds to that of Japan, a society with non-Western origins. In respect of occupational conditions reflecting individuals’ positions in their societies’ social structures, findings for the US indicate that these strongly affect both the self-directedness of their orientation and the effectiveness of their intellectual functioning. These effects are actually reciprocal: having a relatively self-directed orientation and/or a relatively high level of intellectual functioning has been found to increase the likelihood of having a relatively self-directed occupation. These US findings, based on structural equation modeling (SEM) of longitudinal data collected in 1964 and 1974, were first reported by Kohn and Schooler (1978) and were generally replicated in Ukraine with data from longitudinal surveys conducted in 1992–93 and 1996 (Kohn et al., 2004). We test the generalizability of the findings of Schooler et al. (2004) to Japan.

Although there are various differences in occupational settings between the US and Japan, both culturally and structurally, the likelihood that a similar pattern of reciprocal effects might be found in Japanese men (Naoi and Schooler, 1985; Schooler and Naoi, 1988) and women (Schooler and Naoi, 1990) was suggested by a series of analyses based on non-longitudinal data (the first-wave survey data of the present study) and a variety of reasonable, but not necessarily valid assumptions. In the absence of longitudinal data, these earlier Japanese results can be taken only as plausible possibilities. In the present paper, we expand on the findings of Kohn, Schooler, and colleagues in two ways. First, although Kohn and colleagues used the US (Kohn and Schooler, 1983) and Japan (Kohn et al., 1990) to represent stable capitalist social structures, and Poland and Ukraine to represent changing social structures (Kohn et al., 1990, Kohn, 2006), they have not examined the empirical validity of Japanese stability using truly longitudinal data. Therefore, we: 1) examine whether two key aspects of individual psychological functioning—self-directedness of orientation and intellectual functioning—were as stable in Japanese society from 1979 to 2006 as they were in US society from 1964 to 1974; and 2) test whether, over their respective time periods, the reciprocal effects between individuals’ self-directedness of orientation and intellectual functioning, on the one hand, and their substantive complexity of work, on the other, are similar in the two countries.

The Ukraine findings that job conditions affected, but only little reflected, personality raise the possibility that societal change can influence the US findings’ generalizability across societies and cultures. Because the almost 30-year period between the two waves of the Japanese surveys is notably longer than the three-year interval between the two waves of the Ukrainian surveys, more change might be expected in Japan than in Ukraine. However, the magnitude and severity

² For the sociological and psychological implications of the Kohn-Schooler hypothesis, see Schooler et al. (2004).

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